## Learning Enhancement Team

# Managing Anxiety in Presentations and Interviews

**This guide aims to help you recognise and understand anxiety and nervousness which may arise during presentations or interviews. This is sometimes referred to as performance anxiety. The guide also offers strategies to help you minimise any detrimental effects and provides details for a number of further sources of help and advice.**

Related guides: 'Delivering a Presentation' and 'Planning a Presentation'.

## What is performance anxiety?

Many people feel nervous when speaking publicly, either to a room of course peers, conference delegates or an interview panel. This is sometimes referred to as *performance anxiety*.

Performance anxiety, however, is not necessarily harmful. A slightly increased anxiety level can motivate you to do the work needed to that you are effectively prepared for the event and can make you more alert and energised. However, if your anxiety levels and nerves becomes too great, difficulties can occur, which may impair your ability to prepare effectively for and perform during the event.

## What causes it?

Performance anxiety and nerves can be caused by many factors which may include:

- worrying about
- past performance during presentations or interviews
- how you will compare with your friends or other students
- any negative consequences if you do not do as well as you would like
- the reaction of others to your work
- a lack of preparation as indicated by
- hurriedly rehearsing the presentation at the last minute
- not rehearsing or practising you speech
- not thinking in advance about the questions the interviewer might ask.

- other factors not directly related to work, such as previous experiences of
- not being listened to
- not being taken seriously, or being laughed at
- discrimination
- being teased or bullied.

You may not be able to identify a particular cause, you may just be aware that you typically experience nerves or anxiety at the prospect of a presentation or interview.

## What happens when you are nervous?

When you experience nerves, anxiety or stress about an event, certain physical reactions happen automatically. If you recall a time when you were interviewed or made a presentation you may have noticed that you reacted in some of the following ways:

- your voice trembled
- you had sweaty palms
- you experienced shortness of breath
- your heartbeat accelerated
- you had butterflies or an upset stomach  you experienced a generalised feeling of fear.

These reactions are driven by the production of hormones and equip us to fight or escape from situations that are dangerous or threatening. This is known as the *fight or flight response*; your body is alert, ready for action and is preparing itself to cope with the situation. Once the threatening event is over, your body will gradually return to normal. Although this process is designed to assist you during potentially threatening situations, it can cause difficulties, particularly if your level of anxiety is too great and/or it occurs for a long time period.

## What are the signs of performance anxiety?

There is a range of signs which may indicate that you are experiencing performance anxiety and these signs could begin just before your presentation or interview, hours or days before it, or even at the moment you find out about it. Signs can even persist throughout your presentation or interview.

The signs could include *negative thoughts* such as ‘I’ll never manage it’; ‘it will be a disaster’; ‘I’m no good at this’. Having thoughts of this kind can distort your perception of the event and create a cycle whereby the more negatively you think about it, the more stressed and anxious you become, which can in turn increase your negative thoughts. Holding negative thoughts can also have a big impact on your *feelings*; you may be

aware of feeling scared about the event or you may feel generally irritable but not be sure why. You may observe *behavioural* changes, such as putting off thinking about and planning for the presentation or interview, or alternatively being unable to stop thinking about and planning for it. You may also experience *physical* changes, such as experiencing headaches, changes in your appetite or developing sleeping difficulties.

## Strategies to help you deal with performance anxiety

The strategies outlined below offer some simple steps that you can take to try to control your level of performance anxiety. However, for them to be effective, you need to be active in implementing them prior to and during the event.

### 1. Challenge negative thoughts

Having negative thoughts is one indicator that you may be experiencing performance anxiety. It is useful, therefore, to be aware of some of the common negative thought patterns so that you can try to replace them with positive thoughts.

| Negative Thought | More Realistic Replacement |
|---|---|
| 'It will be a disaster.' | **'I will aim to do the best I can.'** |
| 'I will never be any good at this kind of thing, it's bound to go horribly wrong.' | **'Just because I had a problem with this in the past does not mean that things are bound to go wrong.'** |
| 'They won't like me.' | **'They like what they have read on my application form/CV otherwise they would not be interviewing me.'** |
| 'They are looking for ways of catching me out.' | **'They are giving me an opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge of something that I have worked hard to understand.'** |
| 'They will ask about an item on my application form that is a weakness of mine.' | **'If it had been a big problem they would not have short-listed me for interview. How can I talk about it in the most positive way?'** |
| 'I will fail my degree and never get the career of my choice if I don't do well in this presentation.' | **'The marks for this presentation are only a small percentage of my overall degree. If I don't do as well as I would like there will be other opportunities to improve my marks.'** |

Try to become aware if you are having negative thoughts and, if so, think of a more realistic replacement for them (you could consider asking your friends to help you).

**2. Develop visualisation skills**

It may also be useful to visualise yourself successfully completing the task. Imagine yourself coming out of the interview or presentation and moving on to other things in your life beyond the anxiety provoking experience. Plan a treat or social event afterwards that is not dependent upon the outcome.

Using these processes will help you to keep a sense of perspective about the event and stop these things from spiralling out of control. Focus on the present and what you can do now to deal with the situation, rather than dwelling on what you should have done or how similar events went in the past.

**3. Plan and practise your presentation carefully**

Planning and practising for your presentation or interview can have a number of beneficial effects on your anxiety levels, including helping you to feel more confident and in control prior to the event. The better prepared you are and the more you know your material, the more likely you will be to recall it when you are feeling nervous or stressed.

When you are rehearsing for your presentation or interview, picture yourself as if you are in front of your audience/interview panel and rehearse out loud. If possible, do this in front of some friends who could give you constructive feedback about your verbal and non-verbal communication, and your time-keeping. If you do not want a friend to watch you, consider making an audio or video recording of yourself. You can then listen or watch the tape and provide your own feedback. Identify at least five positive things about your skills, as well as areas for further development.

Preparing for questions at the end of a presentation or during an interview may also help to lower your anxiety levels. Read over your presentation notes or application form critically to identify areas of possible weakness and prepare positive answers. Friends, Learning Enhancement Tutors and staff in the University may be able to assist with this. During the event, give yourself time to think of a response to a question by pausing, repeating the words of the question or, if you need longer, asking for a few moments to consider your answer.

For practical advice and guidance on how to prepare and deliver presentations, see the Study Guides.

**4. Map out your anxieties**

You may find it helpful to identify the aspects of the situation which are causing you the greatest levels of anxiety, in order to plan steps to prevent them from becoming a reality. Imagine the presentation or interview and write down the aspects which cause you to feel particularly anxious, and then identify something you could do in advance which

would help to prevent this from occurring. For instance, if you are worried about using equipment, make sure that you practise using it before the event. Alternatively, if you are worried that a weakness will be highlighted, identify specific areas of concern and plan a positive response to this in advance.

**5. Look after yourself**
Taking care of yourself physically and emotionally will help to control your anxiety levels by making you feel relaxed and using up some of the nervous energy that is produced when you are under stress. The Study Guide **Exam Stress** explains the following strategies in more detail and is recommended as a further source of information.

- Eat a well balanced diet which limits alcohol, caffeine and sugary foods  Aim to have between six to eight hours sleep a night.
- Exercise regularly as this uses up nervous energy and relaxes muscles.
- Make time for fun such as participating in a sport or hobby.
- Practise taking control of your breathing. Concentrate on breathing **out** to a slow count of four; the breathing in will take care of itself.

## On the day of the event

**1. Expect that you will feel some anxiety or nerves**
On the day of the presentation or interview, expect that you will have some anxiety or nerves. This is your body's way of preparing itself to cope, so do not try to eliminate your nerves totally, but aim to keep them manageable.

You can also expect to feel particularly nervous at the start of the presentation or interview and it is likely that you will feel shaky or possibly your voice will tremble. If this does happen, change to a slower pace, breathe more deeply and expect that the tremble/shakiness will go away. People do expect to see some nerves at the outset. Allow yourself time to settle into the presentation or interview and then you can perform to the best of your ability as it continues.

Nerves can make you speed up or slow you down on the day. If you are using note cards in a presentation, you may find it useful to put reminders to yourself to check the time and to think about whether you need to slow down or speed up.

**2. Think positively: do not jump to conclusions about people's reactions** Do not forget to use the positive thinking skills that you have been practising up to the event on the day itself. Tell yourself you can do it and try not to jump to conclusions about how people appear to be reacting to you. Some people may look stern or

uninterested, when they are actually just concentrating very hard on what you are saying.

**3. Try to relax yourself physically**

Remember to use the breathing exercise that you have practised. You may also find it useful to do a relaxation exercise to release muscular tension in places such as the neck and shoulders. Take some deep breaths, and aim to increase the distance between your shoulders and your ears. This will help to lengthen your muscles and relieve tension.

**4. Be careful about what you eat and drink**

Avoid food or drink that is high is sugar, alcohol or caffeine, as these can make you feel more jittery. Immediately prior to the event it can be better to have a warm rather than a cold drink. Cold drinks tend to constrict the vocal chords and may increase the likelihood of your voice trembling.

**5. Prepare strategies in case you feel overwhelmed**

Do something that will distract you from the frozen state. You could change your posture or focus your gaze just above peoples' eyes for a few seconds which may help you to collect your thoughts. If you are really stuck you may need to ask for a short amount of time to concentrate because you have lost your train of thought through nerves. People are generally supportive and will think more positively if they see you trying to regain composure.

**6. Reward yourself for a job done**

Praise yourself afterwards for a job done no matter how well or badly you think it went, and then do something which you enjoy as a special treat.

## What can I do to support a friend with performance anxiety?

Friends are usually the first people we turn to when we are under stress. Often, very simple things can help.

- Help you friend to keep a sense of perspective about the event and to develop positive thinking about the situation. Encourage them to do the best they can and to accept that they are not a failure if they do not do as well as they would have liked.
- Help them to rehearse and practise their presentation or interview techniques. Provide them with constructive feedback which highlights some good aspects of their techniques along with identifying areas that could be improved.

- If you will be at the presentation, give your friend some positive encouragement and feedback during the session. Smile, show interest, ask a question.
- Be there to meet them after the presentation or interview and support them no matter how well or badly they think they did.
- Plan something enjoyable to do afterwards to celebrate a job done.
- Encourage them to follow the strategies outlined in the guide and to seek further support if these strategies are not helping.
- Do not take them to the pub beforehand – it rarely has the desired effect!

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

Call: 01603 592761

Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk

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